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Search for Owners of Army 'Time-Capsule' Wallets Continues

Many of the decades-old relics found at a Paso Robles Guard base have been returned to old soldiers, but a new cache of billfolds has surfaced.



AL SEIB *Los Angeles Times*

HIDDEN HISTORY: *Joe Dean Hougland's long-lost wallet contains photos, letters and dog tags from the WWII era.*

Authorities at a California Army National Guard base near Paso Robles had hoped to complete an unusual mission last week: the return of the last of 25 wallets discovered in old barracks to their original owners or surviving relatives.

Some of the wallets disappeared six decades ago and the tale of their discovery and efforts to return them has captivated veterans who served at the base. Base officials thought they were close to returning all the wallets when a docent at the Camp Roberts base museum disclosed this month the existence of five more wallets dating back to 1941.

"The new cache of wallets was a surprise," said California Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Tom Murotake, who has taken on the responsibility of tracking down their owners.

All of the wallets recovered so far have been crammed with personal effects, including identification papers, letters, snapshots and keepsakes, such as buttons and lapel pins. The only thing missing was money.

Authorities believe most of the wallets were stolen from fresh recruits during World War II and the Korean War, emptied of their cash, then tossed into barracks heating ducts.

They remained there — parched but preserved — until authorities began tearing down some of the old buildings several years ago.

When an article about the wallets appeared in *The Times* over the Memorial Day weekend, three wallets remained unclaimed.

Over the summer, however, Jose Pacheco, a Southwest Airlines pilot residing in Texas, picked up a wallet that belonged to his father, Perfecto Pacheco, who was stationed at Camp Roberts in 1954.

He was 54 when he died in Puerto Rico in 1984.

"Initially, I was shocked by the discovery of my father's wallet," Jose Pacheco said. "It's reconnected me with a part of my heritage that I hadn't thought about in decades."

Just last Monday, Jody Ross, 43, of Ukiah, Calif., called the base to find out how she could collect a wallet on behalf of her father, Joe Dean Hougland, 73, a veteran who roams the Arizona desert. She had read how authorities had found her father's wallet and were looking for him.

"I called Dad and told him all about it," Ross said in a tele-

phone interview. "I asked him if he lost a wallet while he was in the Army. He said, 'I don't remember losing a wallet. But if I seen it, I'd know if it was mine.' "

Ross said she has begun the process of acquiring her father's wallet with a goal of enshrining it on a mantel.

Now only one of the original cache of wallets remains unclaimed — a tattered leather billfold that belonged to Robert John Scott, who died in Las Vegas in 1996. Murotake, with the help of private investigator Ed Zemaitis, said he has developed strong leads on Scott's surviving relatives.

But with five more wallets, Murotake is now looking for more owners with the thinnest of clues:

- Frederick Hall, of Muskegon, Mich., whose insurance policy for his 1938 Ford sedan, according to documents in his wallet, expired on Jan. 20, 1941.

- Elmer Ronsick, of Washington, Mo., whose wallet contains a U.S. Post Office certificate of deposit for \$1 that was issued on May 5, 1944.

- Vernon Harold Kruse, of Holland, Iowa, whose Army draft card was issued in 1940.

- Richard Bertich, whose wallet was lost in 1955 and contains a button featuring the photograph of a woman identified only by her last name and the initial of her first name: "Wages, R."

- Alton B. Jones, the son of a retired Air Force technical sergeant, whose wallet was apparently lost in the early 1980s on the sprawling base straddling U.S. Highway 101.

"I'm fascinated by the contents of these wallets and the research that goes into finding their owners because it tells me about the real history of this base," Murotake said.

"It's through mundane details about daily routines — chow cards, photos of buddies, love letters — that we get to know soldiers as individuals, and not nameless, faceless masses of troops."

For a video report on these leather-bound time capsules go to latimes.com/wallets.